

FEET THAT DON'T TOUCH THE FLOOR: PERCEPTIONS IN MARKETING THEATRE
FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

Melora Slotnick

Feet that Don't Touch the Floor: Perceptions in Marketing Theatre for Young Audiences

by

Melora Slotnick

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Thesis Advisor	<u>Becky Bucher</u>	Date	<u>4/23/12</u>
Committee Member	<u>Kristal Heanel</u>	Date	<u>6-23-12</u>
CSU Honors Committee Member	<u>Amanda Rees</u>	Date	<u>4/23/12</u>
Coordinator, Honors Program	<u>Cindy Herz</u>	Date	<u>4/23/12</u>

Preface

It was once my dream to build the theatre of the future: to develop a new organization in the theatre community that would provide new ideas and imaginative learning. Reality and research, however, have pointed me in a new direction. From my perspective, we do not currently need another organization to add competition *within* our theatrical community. Though it is often appealing to start from scratch, what we need most now is to enhance our status and quality. Existing theatres must work toward a balance of competition and collaboration. Disparity is not the issue. Countless theatres in our nation and around the world produce amazing new material and provide incredible environments for their patrons to learn, to explore, and to discover. As technology rapidly creates new expectations of this field, our response must be to expound upon our mission statements and diversify our future options and current product. We need to provide the audiences we so cherish with the best entertainment, education, and escape available. Only when we pay closer attention to our audiences, will our under-funded sector receive more attention.

As a young child (and *no* - I do not deny that I am still young and I *do* intend to remain thus for years to come) I didn't know I would pursue theatre. The first thing I aspired to be was a dentist, simply because of the magical treasure chest where I chose a treat after each check-up. Next, I was going to be a country-western singer following in the footsteps of LeAnn Rimes by singing "Blue" at my first-ever theatre audition for *Wizard of Oz*. Luckily, I was cast (as the tallest and most awkward munchkin) and my life in theatre began. I still did not know it, however, since I dreamed of being the Chick-Fil-A cow and working at Disney during my summers off. By the time I reached high school, theatre had been eliminated from my school so I continued in choir and performed annually in a community theatre program. Though my dreams

were crushed when I learned my height limited me from becoming a princess at Disney (unless you count an evil stepsister) my sights had changed a bit once again.

I was approaching graduation and knew without a doubt that I wanted to be a teacher like my dad (then a math teacher and swim coach), mom (a swimming instructor for over thirty years), and brother (a swim coach and instructor). My family, along with my experiences, inspired me. I went to Columbus State University to major in Theatre Education where I could pursue the arts and education. My desire to be a teacher has remained intact though I have discovered a new passion. Through my work with Columbus State University, the Springer Opera House, and with the Georgia Thespian Conference, I realize that I thrive working as an educator in a nontraditional, workshop-style setting. I have also found that the excitement I experience creating large spreadsheets to coordinate volunteers, making show banners, house managing, or writing grants is personally comparable to being on stage.

In a roundabout manner, this brings me to this thesis. I want to bring more sustainable attention to live theatre. How do we make contact with our cherished audiences and entice them with our art? How is theatre compelling and relatable for an audience? Everyone is an artist within their own field: the mathematician with his calculator, the chef with her ingredients... what is significant about live theatre? What draws people in?

As an intern with the Springer Opera House, I worked primarily in marketing, development, and the box office. I learned about various methods to entice and keep up with the audience. What I learned, though, is skewed toward arts management. As an audience member I am reeled into certain productions for different reasons, but as an intern I often cast the same bait. So what metaphorical bait actually attracts the audience? What fills the house of the theatre?

Is it the banners or posters? Is it the radio spots? Is it a Facebook page? If we hope to continue to develop our audiences during a time of growing entertainment options, we should find out.

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Introduction

The government is in debt and at war, the educational system is consumed by standards and testing, celebrities are overpaid and over-paparazzi-ed, politicians are philandering, and the American citizenry is trying to make sense of it all. With all of this occurring simultaneously, why should American people turn their attention to the under-funded and overpopulated sector of live theatre? What benefits does live theatre offer to society? If the impact is so vital, why do so many theatres struggle to make ends meet? What is missing in the equation?

In the haste of the day to day, we lean back on our trusted routines and often forget to look forward. We post the same ads, we target the same audiences, and we flock to the same shows. More than ever, it is necessary to seek feedback, to be objective, to welcome criticism, and to take risks. It is no longer enough to be creative artists challenging the people; theatres that have earned reputations of high merit have suffered with the rest. We must now accept a challenge from our audience. It is most vital that we strive to be active listeners, responding to the needs of the people and remain flexible as they share their time and energy with us.

First we must get to know the people: Who is our audience? What do they want out of their experience? When do they want to experience theatre? Where do they go when they want to escape or be entertained, educated, or enlightened? Why do they pick one theatre over another? How do we market the arts to them? How do we expand our audience? How do we maintain their support? How do we best serve their needs?

Through this thesis I hope to answer some of these questions using a narrower scope. Within the realm of theatre, I will focus on theatre for young audiences (TYA). I was drawn to TYA as a performer, director, educator, and audience member and I wanted to explore this incredible field. I delved into marketing and the perceptions held by the audience (and in this case, their parents) and the arts leaders of TYA organizations. My goal was to find out what TYA arts leaders assume of their audience's parents and what the parents actually think. Comparing the perspectives of each I discovered which assumptions are inaccurate and how we may better market the arts and draw the attention desired.

First comes first: the research. In order to address this challenge, I will explore material on TYA (or lack of appropriate materials) and identify key differences in the strategies used to market and manage the arts for younger audiences. Following the textual exploration, developmental research will include two qualitative studies: interviews with leaders in arts management for TYA across the country and focus groups with parents living in and around Columbus, Georgia. Based on textual and developmental research, I hope to provide a discussion for the efficacy of different marketing techniques and strategies of arts management for TYA, make predictions about the future of TYA, and suggest some inevitable changes that will affect theatre as a whole.

The History Behind the Full House

The role of the audience has been studied, criticized, and redefined throughout history in order to discover new, inventive ways of attracting patrons to the theatre. Every theatre has a mission statement, which they strive to achieve and maintain with each production. Without an audience to witness their productions, evaluate its value, and ultimately fund their organization, the mission statement remains stagnant. The audience, therefore, plays the most pivotal role in the theatrical experience; as Viola Spolin stated in 1911, "without an audience there is no theatre."¹ A century later, this remains true.

From the very beginning, the audience has been present, even though its characteristics and responsibilities have changed over time. Theatre was once a tribal experience; the society acted as audience for performances like the Egyptian *Passion Play of Abydos* where the production was part of ritualistic communion and ceremony.² The spectator followed the elder leaders as they performed and the art form developed the foundation for future theatrical spaces.³ In Greece by 600 B.C.E., the ritualistic celebrations of Dionysus incorporated a chorus of actors to assist spectators in their comprehension of the theatrical art before them. Over the next several hundred years many theatrical conventions were created. These include new genres, new seating arrangements (from the enormous Coliseum holding over fifty thousand to the traveling bands of actor musicians and storytellers who played on the streets), and of course new ways to critique the art form.⁴

When we leap from the early days in Egypt and Greece to other countries adapting the theatre from their own stories in the early centuries, to the state of theatre today, the audience remains essential though the intent behind differing types of theatre may vary by location, period, and demographics. Theatre has been utilized in a multitude of ways as it has explored its

new conventions and has resulted in a broad expansion of cultural relevance and identification. Whether it is intended to pronounce the particular etiquette of a society, to provide a better understanding of other cultures, to edify people on varying topics, to refute authority, to praise an idea, or simply to entertain, the theatre always maintains an objective. Consider the objectives of Stanislavski's system of acting; every action has a recipient. In order to achieve its goal, theatre must have an audience - its recipient and necessary collaborator.

Throughout history, characteristics and trends of audiences have been topics of discourse: What social classes attended the theatre? Which genres did the different audiences prefer? How did ticket prices evolve? What effect did those prices have upon the audience over time? What other events became competition for the theatre? Many publications address these questions, but unfortunately the discourse on young adults and children in the audiences is rather narrow. The change in audience make-up lacks continuity as little has been done to analyze younger audience members. Those particular audiences formed the basis for following generations of theatregoers and will continue to do so as we move onward in time.

Why the lack of research? In *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, Bruce McConachie discusses the research of London audiences by Davis and Emeljanow which, "found no correlation between the demographics of audience groups and the imaginative range of their theatrical tastes."⁵ Though this research does not blatantly narrow the age range of the audience to exclude children and young adults, the data is based loosely on ticketing and production success. This alludes to an idea that upper class audiences would still attend performances intended for middle or working class audiences rather than assuming the imaginative range of a five-year-old girl is fully comparable to that of a seventy-year-old man.

Richard Butsch (2000) makes subtle mentions of young boys and girls becoming exposed to theatre in his text, *Making of American Audiences From Stage to Television, 1750-1980*, however, the conversation ceases upon discussion of new forms of entertainment like television and radio.⁶ Does this mean young American audiences of theatre are only a remembered past of disruptive young boys perched in the gallery seating and adolescent girls being withdrawn from the theatre by their parents to avoid the foul ideas of prostitution? Surely not, as there are still grandparents purchasing tickets and now their children's children are becoming our parents and young patrons who gained exposure as audience members somewhere along this vague history.

For hundreds of years, theatre for youth has existed across the world and people who perform for children are the most revered and experienced artists. In America, according to Jonathan Levy, the history of theatre for young audiences dates back to the 18th-19th centuries with a man named Charles Stearns.⁷ Stearns wrote several "Dramatic Dialogues" for his students in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and these dialogues spurred many developments in the field in the following centuries. Though I may only speculate, Stearns's work then impacted the work of Winifred Ward, Charlotte Chorprenning, and other revolutionaries in the early and mid-1900s. At the beginning of the twentieth century, wealthy families of New York provided private "frivolous and superficial" theatre experiences for their children.⁸ Likewise, TYA truly flourished in settlement houses and schoolhouses, beginning with the Association of Junior Leagues.⁹ Volunteer social workers used theatre as a method of educating and entertaining immigrants and young people. After twenty years in settlement houses, children's theatre had become established and there was an "awareness of the lack of information available about literature and techniques appropriate for children's theatre."¹⁰

From this brief period in children's theatre history, there are some resounding ideas that developed and are still important today. Children's theatre originated in the education and social work of settlement houses and this forged a long-lasting divide between children's theatre and theatre for adults.¹¹ Additionally, though children's theatre in New York was reserved for the wealthy, children's theatre presented at the settlement houses cost little to nothing for patrons. In the theatre world as a whole, a play for children thus earned a reputation of costing less.

From the world of theatre, we move our focus to the early developments in film in 1905: "Harry Davis opens the first nickelodeon in Pittsburgh."¹² To further understand the state of children's theatre today, consider America's economic relationship with the movies. By 1906, America had its first animated cartoons and theatre earned a popular and inexpensive competitor. As Becker explains, "Even when times were good, immigrant working class audiences saved their nickels for the community store-front movie houses, while middle and upper class audiences came to enjoy the finely decorated, comfortable theatre houses bought or built for the moving picture shows."¹³ With movies as a new competitor for theatre, the audiences sprung from within the settlement houses and abandoned the stage pictures for the moving pictures. Even during the Great Depression, movies proved to be a worthy investment and escape from troubled times, while children's theatre was sparse, despite the aid of the Federal Theatre Project.¹⁴ The significant escape provided by the movies impacted the status of theatre and still resonates with many grandparents and older patrons in our current society.

Despite hard economic and political interludes, children's theatre experienced exponential growth and support. Within the last seventy years alone, American children's theatre has rapidly moved from early conception to thriving; today there are hundreds of professional children's theatre companies like Nashville Children's Theatre in Tennessee or Children's

Theatre Company in Minnesota and special programs of study in children's theatre, like those at both Northwestern University in Illinois and University of Texas at Austin. In addition, organizations that are not specifically geared toward children include productions for young audiences in their seasons.

Children's Theatre IS Theatre

Hopefully my use of "children's theatre" and "theatre for young audiences" (TYA) interchangeably has not caused too much aggravation as we are tackling those terms now. I generally use the two terms interchangeably, but some texts identify a distinction between them. The term "children's theatre" may be interpreted as theatre either produced *by* or *for* children.¹⁵ TYA (or "theatre for young people" as it was termed in the 1980s) refers to theatre produced for children but does not specify whether or not the performers are adults. To blur the lines even more, professional theatres in the United States include children in many productions not specifically called "children's theatre."

One difference we can specify, however, is among children's theatre and TYA versus creative dramatics. Though many of the objectives are the same, "creative dramatics" is process-oriented with no emphasis on an end product or performance for any audience beyond the players themselves. What we find with most theatre companies is actually a hybrid of the three, utilizing creative dramatics in workshops or classes and children's theatre or TYA for productions. For the sake of this thesis and subjective definitions of these terms, I use them interchangeably as I consider them a distinction of the audience, not the performers. I often use TYA since it most clearly indicates a younger audience.

Perhaps writers are not encouraged to utilize Wikipedia, however in looking up “children’s theatre” on the site, Wikipedia redirects the search to “theatre.”¹⁶ Let’s clarify here and now that TYA *is* theatre and *theatre* is a unique experience for the audience. The team required in professional theatre for adults is comparable to that of children’s theatre. TYA requires artists from different backgrounds: the playwright, producer, directors, designers, stage manager, actors, technicians, crew, and business staff and managers. No surprise, their jobs are still just as demanding and merit-worthy as those in adult theatre. A subtle difference lies in the job of the TYA director: they must understand the basic directing concepts, but their expertise in establishing relationships and creating stage pictures must be especially refined because “children are used to not understanding all the words in adult conversations. They respond on a more perceptual level to the rhythm of the language and the sound of the words.”¹⁷ In order to maintain the attention and comprehension of the child audience, directors need to be proficient in creating vivid imagery and action on the stage.

Prior to rehearsals, the director of TYA uses slightly modified criteria in selecting the script from a director in adult theatre. The director must not only keep his or her community’s expectations of theatre in mind, but also consider the community’s view of its children. The director selects a script that is appropriate for a young audience: an audience whose parents or schools make the final decision to see the production. The director then handles the script with dual intentions, appealing to an incredibly diverse audience.

I have already briefly discussed the competition between movies and theatre, but theatre has an advantage: it maintains a flexible fourth dimension where the movies remain two or three-dimensional. As Moses Goldberg says, “*Theatre is ephemeral*. It is happening now, in real time, and we cannot rewind it, freeze the frame, or slow it down.”¹⁸ The element of time in theatre is

not fully controlled by the audience though the audience *does* influence the timing within any theatrical experience. The energy that is passed from artist to audience changes, lengthens, and shortens specific moments in a given production based on the catharsis of the audience and the energy felt by the artists.

Because each artist and audience is unique, theatre is “simultaneously created and experienced.”¹⁹ For example, an audience member will never see two identical productions of *Hairspray* onstage though they may find commonalities between experiences with that particular musical.²⁰ If they see *Hairspray* in the movie theatre, the energy shared is only amongst the audience members, not with the actors presenting the story. This unique energy exchange is both an advantage and disadvantage to theatre. While people can watch a DVD repeatedly and remember viewing it on opening night and the environment they were in, theatre may never be repeated with an identical environment and production. In this way, it is not truly comparable to the movies. Theatre is more “like a sporting event or a religious service: each individual is separate but is also part of a collective, taking on a nature unique to that particular audience.”²¹ A church service may have a similar structure each week but will never have the same sermon or announcements and a game of football will never consist of identical plays and outcomes as another. This is the mystery of live theatre: no one may be fully aware of what they will see or experience until its completion. And even then, I would argue, no one is ever “fully aware” due to the choices we make as spectators.

Children as Audiences and Spectators

A young audience is not fundamentally different from an adult audience. Their feet may not touch the floor as they watch the action on stage, but they experience heightened emotional

responses, empathize with certain characters, and even become restive when their attention is lost or withdrawn by some other means. Consider two examples of literature: *Doors*, by Susan Zeder, and *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare. Both include sensitive issues being addressed by dramatic literature. In *Doors*, a young boy named Jeff deals with his parents' fighting and lashes out against their inevitable divorce, blaming himself for their fall out.²² In *Hamlet*, the young prince of Denmark struggles with his mother's marriage to his uncle and contemplates suicide as an escape from his situation.²³ Both plays deal with young men combating turmoil within their family and finding blame in themselves for the circumstances. Whether the literature of each play is handled specifically for a young or adult audience in production is up to the partnership between the playwright and director. Regardless, the material is relevant to the timeless emotional expression of humanity.

This relevance does not assume that a four-year-old boy will feel the same turmoil as Hamlet as he contemplates his suicide, but he may empathize with Jeff's helplessness as he copes with his parents' divorce. A theatre house filled with children experiences theatre as an adult audience does, they merely respond to different stimuli. Children are constantly absorbing information and learning about the environment surrounding them. As audience members or spectators, children are the most honest critics in the house. Though an adult may feign interest for the sake of respecting others in the audience or on the stage, children place their attention where it is most engaged, whether it be onstage or on the seat where a previous audience member stuck gum underneath the velour cushion. I have personally seen this happen as a child sat with his head between his legs peering suspiciously at the purple sticky bump during a slow moment in a production of *Charlotte's Web*.

An audience of children also responds in a communal manner. The performance in itself is not the only influence acting upon them (nor is the gum under the cushion, thank goodness). The peers and adults surrounding them undoubtedly enhance their reactions to occurrences upon the stage. Just as an adult may find a moment in a play funny but continue laughing only because of the rest of the house's state of hilarity, a child will be tempted to continue their response when others around them deem it acceptable. These responses will of course vary by the characteristics of the other members of the house. If the house is filled with other children around the same age, the responses will be unison and rarely suppressed. A house with a few children scattered amongst the audience may seem more subdued. These statements are not absolute, though; like snowflakes, no two audiences or productions are identical.

Every child has a unique life, unique appearance, unique desires, passions, and ambitions. With decades of research in psychology, commonalities amongst children have been further categorized to explain their development. Naturally, there is not one method of explaining child development, but many theatre organizations have adopted the ideas of Jean Piaget to assist in structuring season, courses, workshops, and camps. Though M.J. Chandler is one of many to scrutinize "just how well [his] early facts have stood the tests of time," Piaget's stages of development are referenced in many texts.²⁴ This includes the text: *Theatre for Young People: A Sense of Occasion* by Helane S. Rosenberg and Christine Prendergast in 1983. Rosenberg and Prendergast divide Piaget's stages into three age ranges, describing the theatrical tastes of preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and the stage of formal operations.²⁵ These stages serve the theatre by providing age-appropriateness, guidelines for selecting material for production, and insights on possible audience behavior. Whether or not Piaget's concepts are

fool-proof, the stages have influenced the theatre by helping to develop a better understanding of the young audience.

When artistic directors and boards create their seasons, when playwrights create their scripts, and when actors perform, attention is given to the differences between each developmental stage to produce a work best suited for the child audience. But what age range defines a “young” audience? Special Education has parameters established (perhaps because children are supported by funding), serving students between the ages of three and twenty-one. Many organizations consider children and young audiences to be between the ages of three and fifteen, recognizing at that age they are old enough to understand and enjoy adult material. The age range is flexible, however, and should be expanded, lessened, or lack parameters entirely depending on the children and organization.

Though it may be useful to understand child development enough to know precisely at what age children will appreciate certain productions, it is more beneficial within this field to understand how to create high caliber productions. As Rosenberg and Prendergast say, “too much emphasis has been placed on the child audience and not enough on the craft.”²⁶ If a child in an audience does not fully comprehend the content of the work in the expected manner, they may still appreciate the artistry and skill of the design team and cast. Inspiration takes many forms for any age; theatre should take advantage of this and provide the audience with the best product possible and allow them to use theatre as a positive influence in any outlet of their lives.

Unfortunately, a reputation exists that TYA is belittling, watered-down, and easy for the artists involved, and therefore not having the same merit as adult theatre. This unfortunate reputation accompanies poor productions and should never be used as a broad description of the field. It is not just one production or company; there are many possible culprits in perpetuating

this reputation. One possibility is subjectivity in what is appropriate for children at specific ages due to a shallow understanding of child psychology. Some companies present shows purely for financial benefit with no emphasis on entertaining, educating, or exposing children to high quality material. A lack of application beyond the theatre itself induces an idea that theatre is a privilege or treat instead of a necessity. Even artists convey a higher merit to their preferred style of design or performance when talking with other artists; this begins a domino effect of uninformed artists not willing to produce works for a young audience. There are surely more asinine reasons why TYA is hung on a lower rung on theatre's totem pole, but the bottom line is this: children must be a welcome audience in theatre. As "society's greatest asset," children who are exposed to fantastic productions of theatre in their early years will continue to enjoy being audience members as adults.²⁷

Front of House: The Business of TYA

A patron crosses the threshold of a theatre with expectations, hopes, and desires. They expect a particular experience and still walk in knowing that their expectations may not be fulfilled. Bruce McConachie compares the manner in which infants trust their parents to how a spectator allows the theatre their full attention and trust. He states, "spectators know that the theatre provides a safe haven for empathetic engagement without the fear of real world consequences."²⁸ This concept is especially important when dealing with a young audience. Children are the most impressionable spectators as they are still developing a foundation of knowledge, and their perspective of theatre is in a malleable and relatively fragile state during their first exposures to the arts. Compassion is invaluable for any theatre arts manager or artist producing theatre for children; this safe haven must not be jeopardized.

When an audience fills the house of a theatre, the theatre arts manager should make the house feel like a home. Home is traditionally a safe place, whereas the idea of a house may be sterile or raw. To assume that the theatre is a safe haven, however, one makes a greater assumption that each audience member has already come into the theatre, paid for their ticket, and begun their theatrical journey. Just as rehearsals for the artists were necessary, steps preceded the audiences' entrance into the safe haven of the theatrical space.

While discussing the availability of spectatorship, Butsch identifies that "Americans spend more of their lifetime being an audience than working or sleeping."²⁹ It is no surprise to note this lifetime engagement not only includes theatre, but television, radio, movies, the Internet and other performing arts. With the competition film, television, and music offer, theatre is often thrust to the backburner. How does a theatre arts manager attract patrons to the safe haven of theatre when other technological advances like Pandora radio or Netflix movies are more convenient and inexpensive, if not free? More specifically, how does the manager attract young audiences?

This is where there is a separation between TYA and other types of theatre. The artistic merit should not differ, the expertise should never be sub-par, and the audience is always necessary. Just as a young audience responds to different stimuli in production, TYA requires unique marketing strategies. But what are these "unique" strategies? What strategies are being used or not used in marketing TYA? What strategies are similar to those found in other areas of theatre? Other areas of art? What struggles are specifically found in TYA? What will marketing TYA look like in five, ten, or fifteen years? What about TYA draws in our patrons?

Fueled by these unknowns, I devised the following developmental research to look into the marketing of TYA and the perceptions held by those in the field. I label it "developmental"

research because it is not a complete package of solutions for current issues, but rather a jumping-off point or forum for discussion and sharing discoveries. I knew I needed to speak with people directly to find out the current opinions in the field rather than comparing texts. Focus groups and interviews appealed to me because answers would not be carefully edited or rehearsed.

The interviews include fifteen arts leaders from different theatres and organizations around the country, with a majority representing children's theatre companies. The arts leaders interviewed include artistic, executive, managing, educational, TYA, youth & family, and marketing directors, as well as general managers. Each has a different level of experience both in the field of TYA and in their respective organization. Each interviewee submitted general demographic information along with their consent form as a basic comparison of the participants. Below is a table of information based on responses from the interviewees.

	<i>Range</i>	<i>Average</i>
Years at the Theatre or Organization	1.5-30	11.9
Years experience in Theatre for Young Audiences	2-34	20.5
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
Is the Theatre/Organization Non-Profit?	14	1
Does Theatre/Organization have an Educational Component?	14	1

As is evident from this table, each arts leader has a different level of experience both in the field of TYA and in their respective organization. A majority of the organizations they represent are non-profit and nearly every organization maintains an educational component (this could be anything: workshops, classes, camps, study guides, school contact, touring, backstage tours, and so on). In addition, each organization caters to a unique target age range, including "all ages," "ages three to fifteen," "four and older," "eighteen months plus," "up to eighteen years old" and others. These age ranges vary widely with each organization, but is having a defined

age necessary for all organizations to survive and thrive? Do we have to specify an age range or would it more beneficial to be a family-friendly theatre? Perhaps the answer to these questions is dependent upon each organization's geographic location. This is a practical concept to keep in mind as many of the strategies shared in the interviews are location-specific and may not be as beneficial for patrons from other areas of the country.

The next table represents the demographic information asked of each focus group participant, submitted with their consent form. Each focus group had two to four participants from local cities including Columbus, and Ellerslie, Georgia, and Phenix City, and Valley, Alabama.

	<i>Range</i>	<i>Average</i>
Parent Age	33-77	49
Ages of Children	2-45	15
Number of Children per Family	1-8	2
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Parent Gender	3	8
Genders of Children	8	18
	<i>Caucasian</i>	<i>No Answer</i>
Ethnicity	10	1

As can be seen in the tables, the participants do not represent a diverse sample. The families made an average of at least fifty thousand annually and the majority was female and white with at least some college experience. Parents ranged in age from early thirties to late seventies and on average each family has two children.

To avoid variance in my input within each focus group and interview, I asked the same six questions verbatim without follow-up questions or examples within each response. This distanced my opinions from the process and allowed for more interpretation from participants. Listed below are the six questions asked of each interviewee and focus group:

1. Beyond the quality of a production, what invites a parent or child to the theatre?
2. Beyond the quality of a production, what invites that parent or child to make additional visits to the same theatre or other theatres?
3. What limitations or challenges are present in marketing the theatre for young audiences?
4. What is successful marketing in theatre for young audiences?
5. What does the future of theatre marketing hold? *and/or* How will technology be used in marketing theatre for young audiences?
6. What benefits (if any) does theatre provide for children as audience members?

I structured the questions in a very particular manner. I wanted first to address what draws people in and why they return to theatre, and then move on to the state of marketing in TYA and where it is headed. I concluded with seeking evidence of TYA's purpose and benefits as they play a large role in ensuring its continuation. The first two questions begin with "Beyond the quality of the production," in order to remove debate over artistic merit and focus entirely on appealing factors or other reasons patrons go to the theatre. These questions served as the undertone for the remaining four. The third question was intended to address the aspects with which theatres struggled. It was intended to bring attention to difficulties both from an individual organization's perspective and for TYA as a whole. The fourth question, "What is successful marketing for theatre for young audiences," was an opportunity for participants to define marketing and theatre management whilst simultaneously sharing successful marketing strategies and outcomes.

The fifth question was dually designed to find out the direction marketing is headed for TYA. It included the element of technology in the prompt as it is evident that technology's role in marketing theatre (and anything, really) is only expanding. I wanted to find out what uses or challenges it will offer TYA in the coming years. The sixth and final question moves in a slightly different direction though it partners with the preceding prompt. It addresses the future of TYA by assessing its current state. In its basest form, this questions attempts to address: "What is TYA's purpose? Does it offer society something of value?"

I applied a time constraint of twenty minutes on each interview and focus group, which provided enough time for nearly every session. Most participants were succinct in their responses and if time remained, they were able to make additional statements through a final: "Please feel free to mention any further comments or ideas at this time." I have taken responses from that prompt and dispersed them where they are most applicable within the research.

In the following sections, I will discuss and compare the responses from arts leaders and parents to find where there are discrepancies or similarities in the perception of marketing TYA.³⁰

Analyzing Question 1

Beyond the quality of a production, what invites a parent or child to the theatre?

As artists we often get caught in the idea that "if you build it they will come," but no one will know the quality of your productions or theatre without some form of invitation or communication. As Betsy Bisson from South Carolina Children's Theatre states, "the quality of the production is only valid if they see the production."³¹ The first-time patron does not have a memory of how fun the experience was the first time or how talented the actors were. In fact,

their previous theatre experiences may be negative. So what draws them in to your theatre?

After repeatedly reading interview transcripts for this question, I deduced the answers to six basic areas that leaders mentioned would attract a first-time ticket-buyer, whether a child, parent, or family, to the theatre. Curiously, I read through the focus group responses and found the same six areas with only a few subtle differences. The six areas, in no particular order, are: title/content, marketing/communication, space, time, financial investment, and potential experience.

“Title recognition” quickly became the most commonly mentioned factor from arts leaders because it is currently on the controversial forefront of our minds.³² In most cases, title sells the tickets and allows for budget expansion or producing new or unknown works. If we are dependent upon big titles for financial support then it often seems survival requires it. But is title recognition really necessary? I consistently heard, “what the play is about and whether it is appropriate for a child,” during the focus groups.³³ Content, for parents, was more prevalent than title. The inclusion of a recognizable character was also often a reason to attend a show. So, what should we be working toward? Should we aim to dramatize storybooks to attract patrons to familiar stories or characters? Should we move away from children’s literature to develop new stories based on relevant lessons for our society? How does title or content really influence our marketing and our patrons?

There is nothing wrong with the popular story or the classic tale, but growth in the field also requires growth in the canon of literature for TYA (and all types of theatre for that matter). Considering the arts leaders and parents’ views, perhaps there are some strategies that could aid in attracting patrons to the unfamiliar work. Steve Martin from Childsplay discusses his organization's use of “The Sesame Street Model” with scripts and chapter books.³⁴ Their theatre

will turn a script into a book for parents and teachers who want it to increase literacy, and then whomever takes the script and makes a chapter book or picture book out of it may make a sequel which can be adapted for the stage and vice versa so there is a “synergy that’s going on - [they’re] filling multiple needs.”³⁵

Another arts leader mentioned that, “a cannon of adaptations of story books [would be] a disservice to the kids,” stating that we are “in that war with recognizable titles.”³⁶ If adaptations are not the preferred route, then we must make the unfamiliar recognizable prior to the production. This is where marketing and communication comes in. Why not showcase the loveable character in your upcoming production as the spokesperson for all your marketing? Geckos and cavemen? Geico. These symbols have been very successful on a large scale and for a non-profit theatre, the same technique can be adapted. But, marketing is not always about a great theme or poster; sometimes it is as simple as: here is the invitation, here are the reminders, and here is a glimpse of what awaits you. As one of the parents in a focus group so eloquently stated, “Children are no different than adults. They see billboards, they see posters, and they see things in the mail. They may not be able to read it but they know the covers of books, they recognize characters...”³⁷ Offer sneak peaks of the story or production, develop materials that enhance clarity of the content like study guides or activities for teachers and parents. These help relate a new story to a classic fable or compare real-life situations to those that will arise in the production or even make your cast and crew more recognizable in the community so they will sell the unfamiliar title.

Now, title or content and marketing or communication may be important elements in drawing in patrons, but there are other elements that may outweigh them. As arts leaders identify, a key factor in attracting patrons is the “welcoming environment.”³⁸ The environment

may translate as location, appearance of the theatre, and even cleanliness of the surrounding businesses or buildings. The space should reflect the vision of the production, the mission of the organization, and must not compromise warmth and comfort for efficiency. Does it welcome the audience? Does it seem to have an enjoyable atmosphere? Does it seem safe? A positively unforgettable environment balances the comfort, safety, and welcoming atmosphere. The theatre does not have to look like a multi-million dollar establishment but it should make patrons feel welcomed and safe, especially if they are to bring their children to the theatre.

Two more factors contribute to a patron visiting a theatre: time and money. Let's discuss time first: parents and arts leaders agreed that times offered and time commitment are both considered in attending a production.³⁹ This is a concern in any kind of event, but in TYA our audience is very diverse and the time they spend within your theatre is time they are not spending somewhere else. Every family has their own schedule, their own set of priorities, and everyone is incredibly busy. This is where the movies are more convenient: "Gosh, we missed the 5:10 showing, we'll just have to catch the 5:40 show!" The TYA audience is comprised of a demographic that deals with naptime, after-school or church activities, work, and family time on a daily basis. It is impossible to provide a show time perfect for everyone and running a production every hour is not feasible. When dealing with families hustling and bustling in different directions, the theatre must provide a time of escape that is worth the stress of getting there on time and committing to a certain length of time for the greatest amount of people possible.

Now, time is money, and money is always a large concern. When asking the first question of focus groups, I was shocked that price was not immediately mentioned as it was during my interviews. I may be bold in this speculation, but many parents are willing to invest

more money in the first experience. This is both a great advantage and extremely dangerous. If the first experience does not meet their expectations or they feel they wasted their money, price will become a barrier instead of an investment. The majority of my focus group participants were middle to upper-middle class so ticket prices may not be a huge concern for them, but for families with lower incomes, the price plays a larger role in the decision. It is vital that theatre is a worthy investment of a family's discretionary income every single time; the cost of the experience needs to balance with the experience they are paying for.

The final element is the *potential* experience. This is not experience in the past tense, but rather the opportunities offered and other factors that will draw the audience into the theatre. It is the experiences they *may* have with their family at the theatre or the friends they *may* see onstage or in the house. It is the extra activities or learning they *may* participate in or not knowing what *may* happen. This "sense of wonder," as Paul R. Pierce from the Springer Opera House states, can come from different sources.⁴⁰ This potential experience is created at home, at school, on the ride to the theatre, or in the moments before the production begins when thumbing through the program. The anticipation of something new, exciting, special, or brilliant builds up the potential experience.

In addition to the six elements, an interesting detail is that arts leaders mentioned the experiences that patron families may have creating memories. The focus group responses are slightly different: the parents consider the potential experience more about the connections the whole family may make with others, the connection the arts leaders and other theatre staff will make with them.⁴¹ It is first and foremost a community that they have the opportunity to join. The patrons aim to share the experience with others and the theatre, just as the theatre and organization shares the production with them. When the production ends and patrons go home,

the potential experience becomes either a memory of awesome excitement that they are anxious to repeat or it becomes something they did and may or may not do again. Only the former will compel them to return to the theatre on their own accord.

Analyzing Question 2

Beyond the quality of a production, what invites that parent or child to make additional visits to the same theatre or other theatres?

Think of that first date: you showered, shaved, and dressed to the nines. You were on your best behavior as you aimed to make the right impression. Your audience bought their tickets and showed up for their blind date with the theatre, but the question remains: will there be a second date? The first impression you make on your patrons may be the most lasting memory they have of your organization, and perhaps, of theatre. After their first visit, the neat division of six basic areas is simplified when considering additional visits. The six elements now become a memory of "the overall experience" from the first time.⁴²

What can we do to enhance our first impression? What contributes to a successful overall experience for the patron families? In response to the second research question, the parents and arts leaders spoke of similar ideas surrounding the previous experience with the theatre. The overall experience is no longer potential, but a memory of which personal expectations your theatre met, did not meet, or far exceeded. The hour or two they spent within your theatre does not sum up their experience; it may include any element from their entire evening and any contact they had with your theatre.

I like to think of a successful "overall experience" at a theatre like a great meal. It is filling, flavorful, and leaves you thinking about all the tastes on your palette. A great meal is a

successful combination of a basic dish infused or sprinkled with seasonings that take your dish from bland to exquisite. Further enhancing a great meal may be great company, a captivating atmosphere, and the chance to try a new dish or select a classic favorite. A patron's experience with your theatre must have a foundation of brilliant customer service before any spicy additions are made. Reading through the arts leaders' responses, the foundation must consist of the right price, ease and flexibility in ticket purchase, ease of access to your theatre, a welcoming, clean, safe, and comfortable atmosphere, and positive personable interactions with every (volunteer or paid) member of staff.⁴³ Other elements mentioned include up-to-date websites and Facebook pages, easy to find information on the play or organization, and an appealing physical plan of the building itself.⁴⁴ All of these make up the foundation for their overall experience at your theatre, and as Chris Peak from TYA/USA says, "that usually outweighs the production."⁴⁵

When dealing with the foundation of an experience, the parents had similar ideas but also mentioned a few things that were not emphasized by our arts leaders. The first of these dealt with the production, not specifically quality: the "selection of the production is very important" because parents want to know that the organization is being "honest about who the target audience is."⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ Parents discussed how readily they would take their children to a theatre to see a play before seeing a movie because of the trust they have in an organization and the standards upheld. Being up-front about the intended audience builds trust and confidence with your patron families. Along the same vein, parents discussed the importance of a "mechanism for feedback."⁴⁸ Parents and families need to feel comfortable and safe in your theatre, especially when they hope to offer criticism that could better their experience. They want to feel welcome to express their opinions but not forced to do so. A balance is necessary that allows families to take part in the process by sharing their compliments, complaints, or ideas.

A final note I would like to add from the parents' perspective refers to price. One parent posed a valid question: "Is it a reasonable price for what they are selling us compared to other forms of entertainment?"⁴⁹ Think about what you are asking from the families you serve. Suppose a family (we'll say two parents, two kids, and grandma) plans to see a production at your theatre. That roughly translates to two adult tickets, two children's tickets, and one senior ticket, if you have discounts. They may not have to time to make dinner at home, so they eat dinner at a restaurant. Now add in gas for the trip and a restless child who has to go to the bathroom during the production. A night like this is easily over one hundred dollars. As another parent said, "it might've been great but if it was really expensive, that might be our one for the year and we'll go again next year if we can."⁵⁰ Many of your single ticket buyers feel like donors after one or more of the hundred dollar nights. Find ways to thank them for their support.

Once you have a strong foundation, you are poised and ready to spice, season, and make their experience have a flavor unique to your organization. The elements that build atop the foundation may be universal, but knowing your audience is significant since some may only work in certain locations or in specific communities. I consider anything beyond the strong foundation and quality production to be incentives, perks, or benefits. They are not engrained in patrons' expectations and do not compensate for flaws in customer service. They may, however, enrich an experience and entice many patrons to return for more. Think about your community and your organization and what perks and incentives you offer. Listed below are some of the perks mentioned by parents and arts leaders that may give you ideas that can be adapted to meet the needs of your audience. Go ahead... get that second date!

Perhaps the most common incentive arts leaders mentioned was an "opportunity for extended participation and learning."⁵¹ This could mean numerous activities that may happen

with every production, with a single show in a season, or may not even be attached to a show at all. Popular ideas include workshops, talkbacks, study guides, inviting schools, holding special times for some performances, snacks or goodies, special features in your playbill, casting children in productions or performers well-known in the community, offering a chance to get onstage or backstage, or a chance to meet with an actor or the cast. Linda Hartzell from Seattle Children's Theatre states they focus on making each visit "a multi-phased experience."⁵² You can email information and activity ideas to patrons before they arrive or send them home with materials that will further "engage them emotionally or intellectually."⁵³ A fifty-minute production may easily become a topic of conversation at home, at school, or in the car. And of course, as Rosemary Newcott from the Alliance Theatre says, "invite them back!"⁵⁴

Analyzing Questions 3 & 4

What limitations or challenges are present in marketing theatre for young audiences? and What is successful marketing in theatre for young audiences?

As I read through the transcripts from the interviews, I discovered that the most extensive portion is in response to the third question. Perhaps this means we are aware of our field and the struggles theatres face, but even with awareness, will these limitations and challenges continue to remain present in marketing theatre for young audiences? The answers from the interviews and focus groups reveal areas within TYA that merit discussion. What I found within the variance in response is not a lack of optimism or creativity, but as one parent says: "lack of inertia."⁵⁵

As I read about the challenges discussed throughout the process, I realized that the responses to the third question also included a wealth of ideas on *how* to overcome the current challenges in the field. In a pursuit to define successful marketing I found that the structure of the

interviews and focus groups did so effortlessly. Successful marketing is *overcoming* challenges and limitations *without* sacrificing the quality of the productions. Successful marketing is about creativity, communication, and relationships; it is about the people involved.

The arts leaders and parents pinpoint similar challenges within marketing, but where they differ is in their ideas for resolution or progress. With this in mind, the analyses of questions three and four are combined to present specific challenges and offer solutions and opportunities for those challenges. Hopefully the notion that “two heads are better than one” holds true as we analyze these limitations from two perspectives.

Communication

One of the fundamental challenges in marketing anything is making sure that the method of communication being used effectively attracts consumers or patrons. Difficulties arise in varying areas: lack of- or overwhelming communication, miscommunication, misdirected communication, split communication, and changing communication. In order to look at what challenges we face, it is important to address exactly how our method is succeeding and where it may be faltering. As Steve Martin (Childsplay) points out, “the communication mechanism changes so dramatically, so quickly” that it is difficult to assess where patrons are getting their information.⁵⁶ Martin continues by saying that, “tailoring [their] communications to the right communication channels and getting the message to the right people is a huge challenge.”⁵⁷ Childsplay works with a split communication by tailoring marketing materials and uniquely contacting different patrons (the schools or the families). The rapid changes in technology and use of that technology are struggles that are troublesome to monitor and tough to keep up with.

During a focus group, one parent posed the question: “Where do you target the

advertising?"⁵⁸ In TYA, the majority of your audience is children and as Rosemary Newcott points out, "you are marketing to someone who doesn't buy the tickets" if you only target that specific demographic.⁵⁹ Another parent described the difference she notices between marketing intended for the kids versus the parents. She defined marketing to children as reaching out to the schools whereas marketing to adults is using resources like billboards and newspapers.⁶⁰ On the other end of the spectrum, a parent claims, "I guess we're oblivious to the marketing," and explains how he and his family only go to productions to support close friends who attend events for his children.⁶¹ There we have a patron who attends exclusively from word of mouth. To further confuse things one parent identifies that she tells her children when a play is coming up and her children notify her when a new movie releases, "because the movies are advertised on TV," she says.⁶² So now we have an idea that marketing to children is done through the schools and television whereas billboards and newspapers catch the parents' eyes. But is that really it? Schools don't tell students when they are drafting a contract with a theatre, they give them the date they are going (this assumes the theatre successfully marketed to the school's administration) and then take them. How do we reach the entire family *directly*?

Several ideas in marketing were discussed that may aid us in answering that question. Beginning with the production, Newcott says that they think of their work as, "cross generational" so that the focus is not exclusive to a child audience but also what the parents will enjoy.⁶³ Betsy Bisson from South Carolina Children's Theatre encourages theatres to find, "as many ways to connect to the audience as possible," regardless of age.⁶⁴ Bisson also told me of a theatre company that thrived off of an elderly audience as their ticket subscribers and how they were not proactively marketing to a younger demographic. Over time all of their subscribers passed away with the organization following suit. In TYA there exists a slightly different issue.

Nancy Florkowski from Motor City Youth Theatre states that, "It's a continuously changing audience," as children grow up and families move around more often than older patrons.⁶⁵ These facts make it more difficult to establish and maintain a subscriber base. Perhaps, being "cross-generational" will engage the families for a longer duration.

One parent recognized that marketing should be "creative and specific."⁶⁶ Another parent said, "If they can't read, then you have to make sure you target them in other ways."⁶⁷ Many parents agreed, saying that mail items "aren't intended for kids" and that "letting them see snippets at other places works well" to gain their attention.⁶⁸⁻⁶⁹ But what are these "snippets?" Without even breaking into technology consider your local Barnes & Noble children's section. Columbus State University offers a sneak peak of each upcoming children's theatre production within the store and awards children who answer questions about what they saw tickets to the production. Some theatres offer "preview performances" to members of the community or specific companies for discounted rates. Still others offer free in-class workshops that include details of a current production and information to go see it for the children to take home. One parent claimed that this was the exact reason her family began attending productions because her daughters wouldn't stop talking about the visitor to their classroom.⁷⁰ Other parents suggested that the local arts involve the kids and cast members from the theatre to Market Saturdays and incorporate "subdued marketing... ubiquitous... people will ask questions and it will spark interest."⁷¹ These ideas don't even break the ice to what is possible with YouTube, blogs, television, radio, or other media.

When Chris Peak encouraged TYA to "upgrade how they are presenting themselves visually," I immediately thought of the successful visual marketing initiated by the Paramount Arts Center.⁷² Jenny Holmes, the Marketing Director, told me about the "red sparkly shoe day"

that her mayor approved and endorsed for her theatre while they were presenting a run of *The Wizard of Oz*.⁷³ Businesses and organizations across the city got involved by allowing employees to wear jeans with sparkly shoes and her theatre offered discounted tickets for patrons who wore them to the production. This got the whole city buzzing with excitement and her theatre established a more recognized presence. Whether you are “writing articles yourself for the smaller newspapers” as Earl Maulding of Actors’ Playhouse recommends, targeting the “home school-groups, the more rural homes... Boys and Girls Club, Parks and Recreation,” as Heather Stanley from Rylander Theatre suggests, we should all be checking up on what marketing is effective and what marketing leaves patrons saying they had no idea you had a production going on.⁷⁴⁻⁷⁵ As Karen McKenney from Rainbow Company Youth Theatre says, “get[ting] people talking to each other” can ultimately be the most valuable tool in marketing.⁷⁶

Competition, Convenience, & Cost

Once upon a time, movie times and menu options were limited and consumers had to arrange their night-out to what the businesses offered. Over time, consumers have been empowered with multiple opinions. Society sets a very high standard when it comes to competition, convenience, and cost. Today, with hundreds of choices to be made every single day, the consumer can select exactly what they want and get it where, when, and how they want it. With more options, comes greater competition. One parent talks specifically about after school and weekend activities, where there is “so much competition for their attention” and another parent says theatres need to, “get them excited, enough that they want to go to the theatre as much as they want to go play soccer or go to the football game.”⁷⁷⁻⁷⁸ Chris Peak warns that “at times, the arts can think very inclusively; they are really competing with each other,” instead of

competing with other types of activities.⁷⁹ Doing so can push patrons away by further eliminating their options. Often having fewer options makes choices simpler, which may or may not be a benefit for the theatre.

When it comes to convenience, the greatest struggle is finding the right time on the right day in the right place. When a family with young children decides to make it an evening at the theatre, Jane Stojak from the International Performing Arts for Youth (IPAY) points out that “getting all of the kids ready and getting them to the theatre” is a huge ordeal.⁸⁰ When they are planning their outing or getting to the theatre for the production, “accessibility,” Heather Stanley explains, is the most important feature a theatre can have.⁸¹ Already theatres are at a disadvantage because they can only offer one, maybe two or three productions a day where movie theaters can have multiple screenings simultaneously. Theatres also need to keep in mind the school calendars and other big events happening in the area. Maulding advises that we “make sure that [we] are in every free calendar, in every local newspaper, publications for children...” as then you are a part of the grand scheme of things going on in your community.⁸²

Parents in one focus group discussed the importance of school holidays or times of the year when traveling is common.⁸³ They specified that they wouldn't buy season tickets to a theatre knowing that one production will be during their annual Christmas getaway or spring break. Another vital consideration for parents is the actual time of day that performances are held. Bath time and bedtime are nonnegotiable for some families and this limits their options when it comes to scheduling an evening or matinee performance into their day. Adding to the complexity of this challenge is that these considerations in establishing a production calendar may be a deal-breaker for one family and a bonus for others. To enhance the convenience you

offer for patrons (most patrons, not necessarily all of them), keep in mind the calendar, keep your options open, and make your location as accessible as possible. The rest is up to them.

No matter how well you stand out from the rest of the competition or how convenient your productions may be, the bottom line for the consumer always remains: how much does it cost? Bisson explains that for patrons, theatre is “cost-prohibitive - usually theatre is far more expensive than movies.”⁸⁴ One parent brought to attention the fact that in some cases, your patrons “don’t know the cost” to begin with.⁸⁵ Having more options sometimes dictates a more complex price range for patrons. It may be wonderful to have things like discounts for multiple children, a la carte-style or rollover subscriptions, or even friend passes, but you don’t want your ticketing prices to become the fine-print or fast-talking “exclusions apply.”

Thinking back to effective communication, one parent talked about a theatre organization that sold tickets through the cast of each show.⁸⁶ Each cast member was given a set of tickets and they sold directly to patrons, families, friends, or business all around the community. This allowed patrons to speak one-on-one with someone who was actively involved with the production and gave the cast incentives by offering a free show shirt or comp tickets for selling a certain number of tickets. Some shows even offered tickets purchased from cast members at reduced rates, which lowered the cost of the tickets for patrons, and guaranteed income for the theatres. Win-Win. No matter how you get people talking, how you sell your tickets, or how much you charge, you need to find a great combination of competition, convenience, and cost that will work for your organization and the patrons you are targeting.

The Canon of Literature/Scripts

How many productions of *Annie* would you go see if your expectation was that each one

would be the same as the previous production?⁸⁷ Even though your theatre company may have a phenomenal new direction for this production, many patrons recognize the title, say, “been there, done that,” and move on. Parents in one of the focus groups talked about how they don’t like “seeing the same thing over and over and over...”⁸⁸ Jenn Doubleday from Savannah Children's Theatre stresses the importance that each and every production is accompanied by the idea that “it is relevant and it is new.”⁸⁹

One of the common complaints about TYA is that there are not enough scripts or the scripts that do exist are not the highest quality. Pierce recognizes that in TYA, “playwrights tend to write down to their audience,” and Hartzell says that TYA is constantly “fighting what’s out there for young audiences... badly executed programming for young audiences in how it’s written and designed and marketed.”⁹⁰⁻⁹¹ Even still, many theatres feel forced to produce the recognizable titles because as Nancy Tonkins from Metro Theatre Company says, “if you don’t have the title you don’t have the audience.”⁹² Tonkins talks about the difficulty her theatre faces as they strive to produce new works that are relevant to their audiences and community. It is difficult, however, when the audience has no prior knowledge of the story or background of the new piece. It may be relevant after seeing the production but the audience may need a reason to approach the new work to begin with.

Education

Considering the limited number of scripts in TYA, the standards-based curriculum, and educational budget, marketing to the schools is a challenge in itself. Doing it successfully, however, is a valuable asset to any TYA company. Earl Maulding (Actors’ Playhouse) described the effort his theatre puts into marketing to the school: “a lot of outreach... a lot of follow-up,

foot work, and follow-through in regards to making sure you're posted in those calendars."⁹³

Every year, schools and teachers receive countless invitations to different places for field trips; the theatre is competing with museums and other special events for the schools' attention. "In terms of school shows everything has to be curricular and land at a perfect time of year to allow the very few school dollars that exist to go," said Betsy Bisson.⁹⁴ Following the proper protocol for each individual school or school district is tedious, but if a great relationship is established, it is likely the school will continue to work with the same places.

Several ideas arose in marketing to the schools. One parent, also an elementary school teacher, relayed that "all of the propaganda that goes to the school is successful if it goes out at the end of the school year so that they can plan ahead for the next year," otherwise the budget has already been allocated and it is too late to arrange additional field trips with coordinating school buses, packed lunches, or more field trips than are allowed by the district.⁹⁵ Heather Stanley talks about the incentives their theatre provides for the schools and teachers: "we do everything for the teachers that we can possibly do because they are trying to cram so much into a school day the last thing that they want to do is organize a pamphlet to hand out to the kids to take home."⁹⁶ Many theatres send sneak peak videos, lesson plans or study guides that bridge the curriculum to the topics in the play, or activities teachers can use to enhance the experience. While students are at the theatre, several focus group parents agree one thing sets the field apart from others: "letting them see the inner-working and the behind the scenes to help them understand... there are so many kids that come that would not be exposed to it otherwise."⁹⁷ Many parents compared this opportunity to Disney World and how it gets their kids thinking about how things are made, what jobs and processes occur, and encourages artistic exploration.

What about the schools that are not buyers? Why doesn't every school have a partner

theatre like schools in Atlanta have partner museums? Is it travel cost? Accessibility? Some theatres bridge those gaps through grant programs, touring shows, school-based workshops, visiting individual classrooms, or developing before- or after-school programs. Paul Pierce says the "connection to the schools," is a vital relationship that will only expand the audience and form a stronger tie between the theatre and the community.⁹⁸

The Cost of Business

One of the most common current challenges mentioned during the interviews was cost and budgeting in TYA. Many arts leaders spoke about how the changing face of marketing and not knowing where to allocate funds in the first place are huge struggles pervading the field. Karen McKenney identified that "time, money, and expertise," are the areas where it is most difficult to overcome other challenges.⁹⁹ It can become a dangerous cycle with those three areas: you don't have the time to learn everything or develop expertise, you don't have the money to hire someone with the skills you require, and you cannot make money without them. McKenney adds, "it's harder to think outside of the box when you don't where the box is."¹⁰⁰ If we address the budgetary challenges in marketing TYA without considering the changing face of marketing and the new developments in technology, however, we are limiting ourselves. In order to grow, we must first consider where we are in marketing, where we are going, what is in store, and how we will fund our progress in the future.

Analyzing Question 5

What does the future of theatre marketing hold? and/or How will technology be used in marketing theatre for young audiences?

Some arts leaders discussed the financial limitations that leave them stagnant. According to Nancy Florkowski, their theatre has maintained a steady program for twenty years, “but,” she says, “financially, we don’t go anywhere.”¹⁰¹ Jerry Stevenson (Columbia Children's Theatre) spoke with me about the cost of paper marketing versus digital marketing, stressing that it is financially not an option to work heavily with both simultaneously in the current economy and with the technological leaps being made.¹⁰² Others discussed the economic drawbacks that in turn mean having a smaller staff. Though Tonkins suggests that the future will bring “another hiring situation where a communications specialist may be needed” to handle digital marketing, it is a daunting goal when growth is not happening.¹⁰³ So if it is not possible to immediately hire a communications specialist while still dedicating time and money to paper marketing, how can we integrate technology into our organizations gradually and benefit from the advantages it provides?

Again, I stress that ideas and strategies may not work in every community; something that works brilliantly for one organization may actually be a financial flop elsewhere. I like to use newspapers as the example when considering location-specific marketing. Where one arts leader says that “no one [is] reading newspapers any longer,” I live in a community where the newspaper is still widely sought after and serves as a valuable resource and marketing tool.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, we must think of the audience; are children in our schools learning how to read a newspaper or interpret the journalistic writing style? Will my community eventually move on from newspapers as well? Time (and now technology) will reveal the answer.

To begin assessing our uses of technology, I would like to quote Jenn Doubleday saying, "technology is the newest barrier but it has also been a great tool for marketing and outreach."¹⁰⁵ At the very core, innovations in technology have a positive purpose for society, even though the actual effects vary. With the swift power of social media, many arts leaders find themselves questioning the age-old marketing techniques that are now faltering or failing entirely. Bisson has a positive outlook, saying, "We are trying to engage people in a way that they are expecting to be engaged now."¹⁰⁶ What does that entail in your community? Common responses include: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Foursquare, eblasts, blogs, websites, local television commercials, radio ads, ticketing systems, Pandora, podcasts, and iPhone apps and games.¹⁰⁷ These can be excellent tools to market and maintain your technologically savvy audience, but what about the barriers that arise with each one?

Let's dive in and begin with a big one: Facebook. With Facebook, everything is free except for ads, which are typically 50 cents a click or worked into a contract where ads are sold as a large batch and are seen at a certain frequency. But what options are within the database? Anyone can activate a Facebook and personalize it with a timeline, photos, applications, information, and a wall to share things like statuses or posts. They also have the capability to send private messages, tag friends in photos, posts, or notes, create groups or events, or skim through the lives of people they know through a news feed of instant updates on their homepage. For businesses, common tools include fan pages, places, events, and groups. Through these, theatres can establish an online presence that is connected with patrons of different ages and receive specific details about their popularity and immediate feedback from their fans.

But being a "fan" is the catch. As Martin (Childsplay) emphasizes, "It is just a tool for deepening the audience's experience... people that friend you on Facebook know who you

are.”¹⁰⁸ The audience that isn’t in the seats is probably not on your Facebook either. Using Facebook creatively is absolutely necessary when attracting new patrons is the goal. First, it is vital that Facebook is not specifically your starting point. It must be an enhancement of the “overall experience” someone has with your theatre. It can beckon them back, provide them with photos, videos, or links, and it can be an easy place for them to offer their appreciation (or dissatisfaction) of your organization. People will talk about your organization on Facebook even if you do not have a fan page, but when the organization can be “tagged” or linked through posts of your fans, your Internet visibility dramatically increases.

One parent talked about how they found out about an upcoming show from a friend-of-a-friend posting about her exciting family night. Two other parents mentioned that anytime a show has been cast locally, they find out on Facebook and go to support the people they know in the community.¹⁰⁹ In this case, the cast members of the show were posting rehearsal photos from mobile phones and linking their own pages to the theatre. The excitement generated from the cast amplified the digital word of mouth and patrons were a part of the process from the beginning. Twitter often shares a similar effect; a parent stated, “if you are targeting junior high students and you have junior high student in the show, they are going to be Tweeting throughout the process...”¹¹⁰ Now perhaps your production doesn’t have “tweenagers” in the cast but instead adults portraying them. This did not stop Rosemary Newcott, who explained that her theatre developed a YouTube TV Show about what tweenagers love to aid a specific production. Newcott said, “The space between artist and customer is broken down as much as you can get” before the production.¹¹¹ The theatre also allowed people in the community to nominate a tweenager in their lives for an opportunity to go onstage.

Twitter, Facebook, and blogs are interactive marketing tools that may seem hit or miss

for some organizations or even certain productions. The changing face of marketing may continuously adapt because of the interactive mediums that it dabbles in. Foursquare is a tool that is used by many restaurants or stores as a competitive interface for its participants. Friends identify themselves on Foursquare and “check-in” to every location they go to. Businesses are then able to give incentives for checking-in, commonly the “first check-in free appetizer” or “twenty percent off to the mayor on every purchase.” The mayor in Foursquare is a participant (not just amongst friends) with the most check-in’s at that location. Imagine the possibilities, “ten dollars off your season tickets when you check-in for the first time” or “one complimentary ticket for five check-ins;” it is up to you what you offer and you can change it frequently. Businesses also list facts about upcoming events or general information about them and participants can list hints about different locations, like “try the salmon, it is delicious.” Linda Hartzell (Seattle) says: “we are going toward a really active form” of marketing: what will work for your organization?¹¹²

If you are able to offer great deals and discounts, another medium that is garnering a larger following is Groupon. Offering discounts for tickets purchased through Groupon (the name derived from group and coupon) will boost your advanced ticket-buying population, and may attract the bargain-hunter patrons who previously thought of the theatre as too expensive. With a bit of trial and error, theatres can find out how many patrons purchase tickets through Groupon and even advertise special deals on Facebook, Twitter, and the organization’s website. Connecting the different media outlets makes the dedicated time less consuming and can also reach a larger audience. The “starting point” of your marketing does not have to be the organization’s website. It may be the website, but it may also be the Facebook page, Twitter, your blogs and patron blogs, the Groupon ad, or even the Foursquare blurb. When the starting point is

up to the patron's convenience and they all lead back to the main website, you have the potential to reach more patrons.

Thinking about your organization's website, Betsy Bisson finds it imperative that it is "incredibly up-to-date, inviting, and easy to use."¹¹³ I'd like to take it a step further and say that it must not only be informative but also interactive. How do we deliver our message in a way that our audiences want to receive it? Hartzell says we need to change how we are "capturing the work" and other arts leaders recognize that photos from rehearsal aren't enough anymore.¹¹⁴ Many ideas to make productions more interactive include rehearsal videos, previews, play trailers, and teaching components available online. Posting videos on YouTube and embedding videos from YouTube on your website is free and an easy way to engage many patrons. But posting and providing links is the simple part. Filming and editing videos may be out of the budget or an expense of time you cannot afford. What are some creative ways to get around this? How do we, as Kathryn Colegrove from Nashville Children's Theatre describes, include "digital storytelling not only as an educational tool but also a marketing tool?"¹¹⁵ One example is incorporating a photo slideshow on the webpage instead of a mass of pictures displayed. Music, text, and sound effects can be easily added and the file can be turned into a video file on YouTube, which you can easily link from any site (the organizations' page, Facebook, Twitter, and so on) as opposed to uploading it for each source.

If you want to include videos of rehearsals or interviews with the cast, why not provide incentives for a volunteer to create the video in exchange for free tickets and resume-worthy experience? If you live in a college town, students are often seeking out internships to build their resume. Even if you are not based in a college town, you'd be surprised at how many community members are talented with a camera or editing software and are willing to donate or exchange

their services. Raw clips are also a great opportunity depending on what you are hoping to share with audiences; allow friends of the theatre to bring their camera phones and cameras to capture a scene or two and post them on their own Facebook pages or blogs for you. Hold a competition during a rehearsal so that the audience members can submit photos and videos and win prizes or tickets for upcoming productions and see their photos or videos used as your marketing materials. Kathryn Colegrove shares that they are “challenged to speak to them where [the kids] are the spokesperson” so promotional videos include children around the same age as the target audience so their communication “is [on] a peer basis.”¹¹⁶ With this, you have a commonality; the kids market to other kids in your audience. They are marketing to “someone their own size” through videos or any other medium.

Another way to make your website interactive is through an online ticket-purchasing software. Stevenson shared the positive effects including developing an email database for eblasts or correspondence, mailing addresses for tactile marketing pieces, information of how ticket-buyers learn about the theatre or production, and information about the patron that can help arts leaders target specific families for later productions and events.¹¹⁷ With patrons who are used to buying tickets or merchandise online from most stores, this provides them a convenience to also purchase tickets at midnight in their pajamas.

Other interactive additions include virtual tours of the theatre, feedback forms or digital cards to the cast, downloadable coloring sheets or work pages catered to specific productions, or even changing buttons or icons. Colegrove reminds us, “everything is instant and changeable for our audiences. They have the ability to take art and manipulate it and be a part of it and participate in it.”¹¹⁸ Understanding this, our use and application of technology should match the creativity and inventive nature of our productions. One parent discussed the benefits of using

closer and more intimate spaces for productions, validating that “you have to be more interactive” in technology and in production.¹¹⁹ After all, if you hope to get parents and children to “step away from [their] computer for two hours and spend time with real people, interacting - audience and stage one-on-one” like Jenn Doubleday states, you may have to communicate this through their computer.¹²⁰

Though creatively using computers as a communication medium may be a new challenge, we cannot forget television... where one arts leader thinks broadcast television is no longer being watched, Stanley talks about how they make “live TV appearances – hitting the morning shows and midday shows so we try to catch the parents on the way to work and the ones who stay at home or on their lunch break. The local TV shows make a big difference.”¹²¹⁻¹²² Maulding talks about how they are “dependent on finding a television station that is willing to donate services,” but that it reaches a wide audience.¹²³ One parent identifies that she hears ads on the radio or television every so often, but just wishes for “more use of the media,” also admitting that she knows “financially it is an issue right now” for theatres.¹²⁴ Television advertising (whether on local shows or in commercial breaks) is like newspapers in that it is dependent upon your community. Are your patrons watching television or are they catching their favorite episodes or news updates online? Are they reading the newspaper or do they have an iPhone app that delivers news with the touch of a button. How do arts leaders tap into that?

Though we must tackle new technology and generate clear communication methods, we cannot look at this new leap as *dealing with* digital marketing. From that perspective, digital marketing is very difficult and seems like a negative direction. Instead, we must *delve into* digital marketing keeping in mind staff size and expertise, location and community, and the focus of each production or season. Take digital marketing for what it is and take on what you can handle.

As Martin states, “understanding the changing dynamics and being able to adapt” is the most valuable action arts leaders may have at this time.¹²⁵ Marketing is changing because the audience is changing. Peak says, “theatres have to think more proactively... what are unique and interesting ways that we can still reach the same audience... the same dollar?”¹²⁶ Remember that an online video may be effective because it can be replayed repeatedly whereas an experience in the theatre is unique and very personal; it is a once in a lifetime event. When you can combine the benefits from both of these, the advantages are profound.

We must remember that theatre offers a different experience than the movies so we can only be thrilled when patrons are willing to adventure into multiple areas of the arts. We do not always have to compete with the movies, as one parent points out: “sometimes technology wins over theatre” and that is not the end of the world.¹²⁷ It is necessary to understand that television and movies may sometimes win over live theatre even with successful marketing. Regardless, organizations should take advantage of the most effective marketing strategies for their specific locations. Is it technology? Is it direct mail? Is it face-to-face interaction? One arts leader says, “we aren't totally paperless, but we are getting there,” while still another says, “we are not considered junk mail even though we are... we send that over-sized postcard in the mail, we see a bounce at the box office.”¹²⁸ Perhaps we should find “a combination of grass roots and keeping up with the technological world,” like Earl Maulding advocates.¹²⁹

Does sending something on an iPhone or iPad qualify as the new tactile marketing? What about parents who prefer “face-to-face” interaction or postcards in the mail? We have to get to know our patrons to understand how they communicate because successful marketing is not the brochures you hand out, the shows you produce, or the slogans or technology you use.

Successful marketing is overcoming challenges; it is how you communicate and the relationships you share with your audience.

Analyzing Question 6

What benefits (if any) does theatre provide for children as audience members?

Why do we work so hard to overcome challenges and speak directly with our patrons? Why do we work tirelessly to produce incredible works and provide educational programs for the parents and children in our community? These questions are simple to answer even though *how* we do these things remains a question we must reconsider time and again. I asked this final question of each arts leader to find out why facing the challenges and limitations is worth it. I was not surprised to find out how passionate our arts leaders are and how much they believe in the benefits of their work. I asked this question of each focus group to discover what impact theatre has provided for their families and was astounded to hear so many of the arts leaders' ideas validated. With the changing face of marketing, financial burdens, and numerous competitive options available for patrons, it is nice to be reminded of why we do this and how it benefits the community, its children, and the future of arts in America.

Tonkins says that theatre "has so much real-world application. It gives students another opportunity to be more successful in other areas of their life."¹³⁰ This concept only elicits agreement from other parents and arts leaders. One parent claims that theatre can "develop their interest in the outside world and how to speak about things and how to make improvements without being overly critical;" another discusses how "theatre pulls together other art forms and artists."¹³¹ Theatre also helps children develop an invaluable ability to collaborate successfully with others in school and eventually in the professional world. It builds children's respect and

appreciation for artistry, literature, stories, other people, other cultures, and themselves. Karen McKenney says that theatre helps children decide “the difference between real and pretend” and I think Jane Stojak explains this in saying theatre provides a “direct connection with performers.”¹³²⁻¹³³ Children are more aware of the storytelling process and the pauses that happen in a story onstage and how they may translate into real life.

Theatre also allows for reaction, interaction, and enjoyment as many arts leaders and parents point out: “they can laugh, they can say something in response” and their response helps shape the experience and the actors’ performance.¹³⁴ One parent even found that theatre “was a vehicle for expression even through the awkward years. Everybody’s so accepting. It’s so open that you’re okay no matter what; no matter what you look like, how you act; they learn presence and control but they also learn freedom.”¹³⁵ Theatre was an outlet of expression for her children as audience members and participants to explore problems and questions they were experiencing. Maulding shares that theatre can provide “an example of something you’re going through (a theme or an idea of bullying or divorce presented in a show in a creative way or someone that’s willing to stand up for themselves in one of those things) it really gives them an opportunity to see a resolution or a way to handle a problem that they might have.”¹³⁶ Maulding also talks about how it can show multiple ways to handle a situation and consequences for certain actions so that children can weigh different options.

Bisson says that with theatre, “you’re spawning the imagination and vision for the future.”¹³⁷ Theatre is inspiring children to create things independently and also become involved with others. Paul R. Pierce adds to this idea by saying, “[children] think of problems in terms of community rather than in terms of an individual... they think in terms of ‘we’ instead of ‘me’ and that is good for society.”¹³⁸ Not only are you building future theatre audiences by engaging

children with TYA, but you are also growing future leaders and society members. As Linda Hartzell of Seattle Children's Theatre says, "theatre teaches us to communicate, to relax, to set goals and objectives for projects, to be resilient, to take risks, to be perceptive about other people and our self, to have a sense of humor. It's all the things we want successful people to be."¹³⁹

Theatre is entertainment, social development, creative exploration, and education, and "for some children," Nancy Tonkins says, "their experience in the theatre can be life-changing," and may become a place for them to dream, express themselves, and excel where they may struggle elsewhere.¹⁴⁰ For many troubled students, the theatre may be a safe place for them to be themselves. Steve Martin explains that theatre events are "life-affirming" and "develops literacy and critical thinking skills because you're figuring out the play as it goes along and you're helping the characters."¹⁴¹ This will only encourage empathy and understanding from children who watch a character struggle with a conflict, make decisions, and interact with others in particular ways. As one parent says, "if the show is controversial in some way, then they ask 'why' and it leads to discussion" at home and with their peers.¹⁴²

Children's early theatre experiences may "instill a love of the arts" like one parent says, and even shape their pursuits later in life.¹⁴³ For others, theatre may be an event that teaches them appropriate behavior during a live performance, which is applicable in many situations. Heather Stanley says theatre may "train them to have a discerning eye for performance," even shaping their opinions of the world around them and their artistic taste.¹⁴⁴ Though not every child will fall in love with theatre and be a life-long patron, *every* child should have exposure to the immeasurable benefits theatre offers and have the opportunity to be a part of the magic we call TYA.

Conclusion

After exploring many perspectives within this research, I believe the future holds a wealth of exciting opportunities for TYA organizations to develop their local audiences and their national or international reputations. One of the best ways for TYA to do this is through inventive marketing. In order to take advantage of new options in the field, we must move forward and embrace the challenges awaiting us-- hardball budgeting and technology included. We are in real-time and the issues or limitations we face are not foreign to other organizations within theatre and other fields. It is time to look forward while recognizing the past's blunders, successes, and lessons. Perhaps a theatre decides to be paperless for a production and it doesn't benefit the organization as much as a postcard or hanging banner. But this is still success, as every attempt allows arts leaders to understand their audience's specific needs and methods of communication. How we learn from these lessons is what will strengthen and benefit each organization and theatre as a whole.

TYA is not currently in a slump nor does the field hang on a lower rung of an artistic totem pole. Theatre is perpetually in a "transitional phase." Current challenges are not newly initiated, nor will they fade with short-lived fads unless we develop and share creative marketing strategies throughout the field. Fortunately, the benefits of our work will not fade away either as long as we continue to cherish our audience and share our passion. If we also share our passion with our colleagues in this field, imagine how we may learn, thrive, and deepen the impact of our art.

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- ³⁰ Most endnotes from this point forward will refer to interview or focus group transcripts. Some quotes will include the participant's name and organization with the citation while others will be cited in a different manner to maintain the participants' anonymity.
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- ³⁴ Steve Martin (Managing Director, Childsplay), telephone interview by Melora Aine Slotnick, June 28, 2011, transcript, 3.
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- ⁹² Nancy Tonkins (Marketing Director, Metro Theatre Company), telephone interview by Melora Aine Slotnick, August 17, 2011, transcript, 2.
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- ¹⁰¹ Nancy Florkowski (Artistic Director, Motor City Youth Theatre), telephone interview by Melora Aine Slotnick, August 10, 2011, transcript, 2.
- ¹⁰² Jerry Stevenson, (Artistic Director, Columbia Children's Theatre), telephone interview by Melora Aine Slotnick, August 12, 2011, transcript, 1.
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- ¹¹⁵ Kathryn Colegrove (Managing Director, Nashville Children's Theatre), telephone interview by Melora Aine Slotnick, July 29, 2011, transcript, 1.
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- ¹¹⁹ Focus Group 5, conducted by Melora Aine Slotnick, August 9, 2011, transcript, 2.
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- ¹²⁵ Steve Martin (Managing Director, Childsplay), telephone interview by Melora Aine Slotnick, June 28, 2011, transcript, 2.
- ¹²⁶ Chris Peak (Executive Director, TYA/USA), telephone interview by Melora Aine Slotnick, July 6, 2011, transcript, 1.
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